

REAGAN TO RELENT ON SECRECY PLEDGE

Order on Polygraph Tests Also to Be Withheld, Aide Says

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 14— President Reagan has decided to suspend key provisions of a widely opposed national security order that would impose lifelong censorship on more than 128,000 Government officials and greatly expand the use of lie-detector tests, an Administration official said today.

The official said that those features of the directive, issued by Mr. Reagan last March but sidetracked on Capitol Hill, would be withheld while the Administration tried to negotiate a compromise with Congress.

"The President has decided to suspend those parts of the directive that are controversial, and where there has been a lack of understanding by Congress," the official said. "We are talking to Congress about ways that we could improve security without interfering with peoples' rights."

Use of Tests Increased

One provision that has aroused great opposition calls for an increase in the use of lie-detector, or polygraph, tests in inquiries into unauthorized disclosures of national security information. Another would require officials who handle highly classified information to sign pledges agreeing to submit, for the rest of their lives, any writings for "prepublication review" by Government censors.

Both these key provisions would be rescinded, the official said. Among other provisions, the order requires agencies to adopt new policies on reporting unauthorized disclosures of information and on contact between employees and journalists.

Several Administration officials said Mr. Reagan's decision was aimed at eliminating a potential political problem caused by widespread criticism of the far-reaching order.

One official said the White House was hoping "to remove it as a sore spot, a source of controversy" in an election year. Another suggested that if the White House did not reach a compromise with Congress, the President could reissue the order if re-elected.

Congress last year postponed implementation of Mr. Reagan's original directive until April 15, with some Republicans joining in attacking it. Senator Charles McC. Mathias Jr. of Maryland said it would create "a system which would allow the officials of one Administration to censor the writings of their predecessors."

White House Discussion

Internal debate about changing or withdrawing the controversial features of the order began more than a month ago, according to one Administration official involved. In a meeting in the Roosevelt Room of the White House a few weeks ago, he said, top members of the Administration discussed whether the rule should be withdrawn altogether or narrowed in scope.

The official said that among those present were Edwin Meese 3d, the White House Counselor; James A. Baker 3d, the chief of staff; Michael Deaver, the deputy chief of staff, and Fred Fielding, the White House counsel.

Also involved in the discussion, he said, was Richard K. Willard, the Justice Department official who has been chiefly responsible for drafting the Administration's program to guard national security secrets.

The official said that at the meeting, Mr. Willard opposed rescinding the order's key provision and argued instead for limiting the breadth of it by requiring prepublication review for a specified period, such as 10 or 15 years, rather than forever.

The official said that talk of rescinding the order during the meeting centered on the idea that unless the Administration did something itself to make the directive more palatable, it would be forced to deal with a solution provided by Congress.

The White House, this official and others said, seemed to be inclined to withdraw the controversial aspects of the order.

Mr. Willard, who is acting as chief of the Justice Department's civil division, said today he could not comment on

the officials' statements. Mr. Fielding did not return calls to his office.

As of two months ago, Reagan Administration officials acknowledged that not a single top Reagan official and only a handful of people in lower ranks had signed the new secrecy pledge. Aside from bureaucratic delays, they said they were attempting to proceed cautiously because of the opposition in Congress.

Opposed by A.C.L.U.

Around the same time, in a debate sponsored by the American Bar Association, Mr. Willard denied "that this Administration has done anything radically different from previous administrations" in attempting to safeguard national security.

But Floyd Abrams, a New York lawyer who has represented many news organizations in battles with the Government, described the Reagan policy as fundamentally different from that of previous administrations. A specialist in the First Amendment, Mr. Abrams contended that the Administration's "fixation" on national security came "at the expense of freedom of expression."

The American Civil Liberties Union has also spoken out against Mr. Reagan's directive. John Shattuck, its legislative director, said the order's policy on lie-detector tests raised constitutional questions. The directive warns Federal employees that an agency investigating an unauthorized disclosure of information might decide that "adverse consequences will follow an employee's refusal to cooperate with a polygraph examination."

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